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SUBJECT: GREECE WILDFIRES - USAID/OFDA SITUATION REPORT AND
ASSESSMENT TEAM REPORT

REFS: A) ATHENS 1687 B) ATHENS 1700 C) ATHENS 1707

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Summary

11. According to Greek firefighting authorities, the 2007 wildfire season in Greece was the worst on record, killing 76 people, injuring numerous others, and burning 270,000 hectares of land. In response to a request from the Government of Greece (GOG), the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) provided more than USD 1.9 million in humanitarian assistance, including the procurement and transportation of emergency relief supplies and the deployment of a six-person technical assessment team from USAID/OFDA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's U.S. Forest Service (USFS). From September 1 to 7, the team visited fire-affected areas and met with GOG officials to develop a longer-term program for supporting the GOG's fire stabilization, rehabilitation, preparedness, and planning activities.

Overview of 2007 Greek Wildfires

12. Wildfires are an annual occurrence in Greece, with significant blazes occurring in 1997 and 2000. [Note: As in the western U.S., the Greek wildfire season generally lasts from early June through mid-October. End Note.] However, according to Greek authorities,

the 2007 season was the worst on record with an average of up to 85 fire starts and 200 active blazes per day across the country. A lengthy heat wave in June and unusually strong, dry winds in August exacerbated the region's risk for wildfire. From August 23 to August 31, more than 130 fires broke in the Peloponnese alone between August 23 and 31, and authorities have 0,000 hectares of wild land in Greece's north, on the Island of Crete, and around Athens, including on Mount Parnitha and Mount Pendeli. These blazes reportedly killed ten people, including two Greek firefighters and two Hellenic Air Force pilots flying firefighting aircraft, three part-time firefighters in Crete, and three civilians in Egio Prefecture (REFTEL). The fires also damaged private property.

¶4. In late August, fires in the Peloponnese and Evia regions killed an additional 66 people and burned across more than 240,000 hectares of land. Estimates of the number of homes and buildings destroyed by the fires range from 1,700 to approximately 4,000. Thousands of livestock also perished in the flames. In many areas of the Peloponnese and Evia, damage from the blazes suggested that the fire spread rapidly across the dry terrain, incinerating otherwise fire-resistant trees with super hot flames and overwhelming the response capacity of Hellenic Fire Brigade.

15. Government of Greece authorities noted that the Hellenic Fire Brigade fought the fires with 7,130 firefighters, 930 vehicles, and dozens of aircraft (including foreign provided aircraft) as well as with 3,000 Greek Military personnel, more than 200 volunteers, and support from 20 European Union states and neighboring countries.

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¶6. The causes of the fires vary, and most blazes are still under investigation. According to GOG authorities, some fires were the result of arson while others were started accidentally. In Evia Region, welders triggered one of the fires. In Ileia Prefecture on the Peloponnese, an elderly woman discarded burning oil from her frying pan, inadvertently starting a massive blaze which killed 19 people including a mother, her mother-in-law, and her four children.

¶7. Because of the widespread damage, the GOG declared a state of emergency late in the day on August 25. In addition to devastating vast areas of Greece, the fires caused an estimated USD 1.6 billion in economic damage, according to Greek finance officials. The fires also have political ramifications for the forthcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for September 16.

USG response

¶ 8. On August 27, Embassy Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas Countryman declared a disaster due to the magnitude of the wildfires in Greece and the damage caused to loss of life, property, and livelihoods. In response, USAID/OFDA immediately provided USD 100,000 through the U.S. Embassy in Athens to the Hellenic Red Cross for the local purchase and distribution of emergency relief commodities for fire-affected households. USAID/OFDA also provided the Hellenic Fire Brigade with emergency fire-fighting equipment, including 3,000 complete Nomex fire suits. On September 5 and 6, USAID/OFDA transported to Greece additional emergency relief commodities, including 300 tents, 3,000 sleeping bags, and 10,000 blankets, which were given to the Hellenic Red Cross. The total value of the firefighting equipment and emergency relief commodities is USD 610,000.

¶9. At the request of the Government of Greece, and in cooperation with the U.S. Embassy in Athens, USAID/OFDA deployed a six-person interagency technical team on August 2 to assess the impact of the wildfires, evaluate potential hazards created by newly burned terrain, and provide technical assistance to the GOG in responding to the current emergency and addressing long-term wildfire management issues (see para 12).

¶10. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2007, USAID/OFDA is providing more than USD 1.9 million in emergency and technical assistance to Greece to

reduce the suffering of fire-affected households and mitigate the longer-term economic impact of the fires on Greece.

¶11. On August 29, Acting Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance and Acting USAID Administrator, Under Secretary of State for Management Henrietta R. Fore met with members of the GOG. [Note: Acting Administrator Fore had arrived in the region on August 16 as part of a private trip. End note.] Acting Administrator Fore also gave an exclusive interview to Greek State-owned television, in which she expressed condolences on behalf of the USG and reiterated a strong commitment to assist the GOG with addressing future catastrophic fires.

Inter-Agency Technical Team

¶12. From September 2 to 8, a six-person interagency technical team traveled to Greece to meet with fire response officials and assess the human and environmental impact of the recent wildfires. Led by USFS Director of Fire and Aviation Management Thomas C. Harbour and USFS Assistant Director of International Programs Stephanie Fritz

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¶13. The team spent four days visiting burn sites in the Evia, Attica, and Peloponnese regions accompanied by officials from the U.S. Embassy in Athens, the Hellenic Fire Brigade, and the GOG Foreign Ministry. On the island of Evia, the team viewed fire clean-up and emergency stabilization operations in areas impacted by severe wildfires in early and late August. On Mount Parnitha on the outskirts of Athens, the team observed where the Hellenic Fire Brigade successfully repelled fast moving flames threatening residential communities at the base of the mountain. Around the Peloponnese, the team visited the sites of some of the largest and most deadly 2007 fires, including two burns in Ileia Prefecture. In addition, the team observed the devastation caused by fires in Arkadia and Lakonia prefectures.

¶14. Following the field visits, the team met with GOG officials, including the Public Order Minister, the Director of the Hellenic Department of Forestry, and the Secretary General of the Ministry for Public Order. The purpose of the meetings was to encourage additional fire-fighting cooperation and coordination between the GOG and the USG.

¶15. To better understand how the GOG manages national and regional fire responses, the team visited the national centralized operations center and met with the Hellenic Fire Brigade's Senior Fire Chief, who extended his appreciation for U.S. assistance and welcomed the opportunity for further collaboration.

Analysis and Recommendations

Overview - Increasing Fire Risk:

¶16. Climate: As in many other countries worldwide, wildfire risk and vulnerability are increasing in Greece. Climate change and environmental change play a role in this increased risk. Following an extremely dry winter, Greece experienced three heat waves in June with daytime temperatures reaching more than 40 degrees centigrade. The Hellenic Fire Brigade recorded over 200 fire starts per day between June 25 and August 31. Regional weather patterns caused unusual strong northeasterly winds in August that spread the later fires quickly through parched forest and agricultural areas. The largest fire in Peloponnese burned approximately 44,000 hectares, more than twice the size of the largest fire in Greece's previous recorded history.

¶17. Economic and Social Patterns: Economic and social shifts in Greece also contribute to vulnerability. Since the 1970s, the demographics of Greece have shifted dramatically as populations have moved away from traditional villages to the urban centers of Athens and Thessaloniki, extending areas of habitation outward into surrounding hills. Older people who remain in villages are not able to maintain traditional gardens that previously provided a natural

perimeter, or fire break, between towns and forested areas. As these former village gardens are seeded by trees and shrubby species, fuels creep closer to homes and significantly increase the likelihood that wildland fires will spark structural fires. The lack of a natural perimeter also leaves populations without a "safe haven" when large or fast-moving fires approach their villages.

¶18. Familiar Patterns to USG Firefighters: Similar to Greece, the United States has faced increased fire risk and record breaking fire seasons in recent years, with particular difficulty in the

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wildland/urban interface-where new construction encroaches on previously undeveloped land. As such, continuing cooperation with a focus on management approaches, best practices, and technical applications in fire management will be beneficial to both countries. The following paragraphs outline a proposed program of technical assistance and collaboration between the GOG and USFS to maintain and enhance this important relationship.

Burned Area Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation

¶19. Technical Team Findings: In the team's four-day survey, the USFS Soil Scientist observed fire damage and related soil instability, which will increase flood and landslide vulnerability in the upcoming rainy season.

¶20. In Attica and Evia, the team visited several sites that exhibited high burn severity, particularly on Mount Parnitha on the outskirts of Athens. However, the team was impressed with the GOG's intensive slope stabilization efforts in this area, which included contour felling and stream grade stabilization. In the shrub ecosystems in Evia, overall burn severity tended to be moderate. According to the USFS Soil Scientist, these ecosystems will recover quickly due to quick sprouting and regrowth of fire-adapted species.

The soil scientist concluded that Greek officials were successfully managing emergency stabilization in areas viewed by the team.

¶21. In Peloponnese, the team observed a number of large areas that demonstrated steep and/or unstable slopes and high burn severity in close proximity to population centers, agricultural fields, roads, infrastructure, and world heritage archeological sites. Surviving structures, ranging from homes and cottage businesses in small village communities to the ancient stadium in Olympia, are potentially at high risk from debris flows during the upcoming rainy season. The assessment team concluded that this hazard needs to be evaluated as soon as possible to prevent further loss of life and property. The technical team was particularly concerned about landslides and wash-outs in villages served by a single access road, which could isolate flood affected populations during the rainy season.

¶22. Recommendations: The technical team proposes to provide immediate burned area stabilization support to the GOG during the months of September and early October 2007. This assistance would begin with the preparation of hazard and risk maps for fire-affected areas of Greece, based on remote sensing and geographic information systems data available through the U.S. Forest Service and other sources. Maps would be shared with the Greek Ministry of Agriculture, which is responsible for developing appropriate fire-affected areas. in select areas to identify specific values at risk and possible mitigation measures prior to damaging storms in the rainy season. In meetings with the Director and staff of the Greek Department of Forestry on September 8, the technical team confirmed that the GOG welcomes this assistance and identified technical officers who are planning to follow-up with the GOG.

Wildfire and Emergency Management

¶24. Technical Team Findings: With combined experience of over 75 years in wildfire management, the technical team was nonetheless struck by the scope and magnitude of wildfire damage in Greece, particularly in the hardest hit areas of the Peloponnese. The

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